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SUBJECT: ACAUA TRIP REPORT: THE POLITICS OF HUNGER IN  
BRAZIL

REFS : (A) 03 Brasilia 3939

(B) 03 Brasilia 3867

(C) 03 Brasilia 3347

(D) 03 Brasilia 1192

1. SUMMARY. Acaua is a modest municipality of 5,430 people in northeastern Brazil that was selected as one of two pilot communities for President Lula's flagship social program "Fome Zero" (Zero Hunger) in February of 2003. Econoff's June 2, 2004 trip to Acaua provided a sharp contrast to desolate, destitute pilot sister town of Guaribas (Ref. A). Acaua's infrastructure and accessibility is far better than that of Guaribas and many surrounding municipalities. A trip to Acaua begs the question of how this municipality was selected as a Zero Hunger pilot town and invites the answer that the choice was political rather than needs-based. By its inhabitants' own accounts, Zero Hunger has brought only minor and spotty benefits to the community, and the recent watershed improvements in local life have come rather with electrification and the ongoing construction of cisterns - both initiatives of the previous, Cardoso administration. END SUMMARY.

2. Both Acaua and Guaribas are in Piaui, one of Brazil's poorest states, have mayors from Lula's Workers' Party (PT), and are the Zero Hunger pilot towns. There, the similarities end. In contrast to Guaribas, Acaua has several municipal buildings, some cobblestone roads, general stores, budding businesses, and satellite dishes on several homes. Note. The scattered satellite dishes mounted on numerous Acaua dwellings cost 400 Reals - quite a luxury when considering the minimum wage of 260 Reals per month. End note. According to many people, the defining moment of increased prosperity was not the arrival of Lula's Zero Hunger food cards and accompanying social programs, but electrification three years ago.

3. Eraldo, 29, has had a tire repair business for five years. He worked during daylight hours in the dim premises before he received electricity. He only had a pump and rudimentary accoutrements to fix the tires. Today he has lights, a compressor, and an electric cutter which has replaced his hand-saw. His home is at the side of the shop, and he has converted the front part into a snack shop. He displays chips and has a case with hot foods. Eraldo's little store caters to students who sometimes come for lunch from the vibrant blue three-room school catty-cornered from his shop. The fact that students have discretionary-spending money for less-nutritious snacks was a surprise when put in the context that this was a Zero Hunger pilot town.

4. Renato, 36, has had the largest grocery store in the community for seven years. Renato estimated that about half the people in the municipality benefit from Zero Hunger. He commented that his gross income has not increased since the implementation of the program: just the form of payment from many customers has changed. The blaring television could be seen from the counter, fed by a satellite dish. The shelves in the two large rooms were stocked not only with staples, but with what most would consider discretionary items like nail polish, fancy flip-flops, liquor, and sling shots. The freezer section contained meat and ice cream.

5. Equmira, 29, is one of five teachers in the secondary school. She was born in Acaua, went to the college in Piaui's capitol, Teresina, and came back to the family farm to live with her parents and four brothers. She teaches 30 9-17 year-old youngsters four hours per day, eight months a year. Equmira did not believe her students faced malnutrition before Fome Zero commenced, since there were many farming families with children in the school, and added that the biggest difference was the five cisterns built in the community over the last few years, which she associated with the program. Note. Interesting that Equmira associates these cisterns with Zero Hunger, as the installations were initiated during the Cardoso administration with UNICEF and World Bank funding.

16. Twenty-seven-year-old Val was born in Petrolina, a city two hours away in the state of Pernambuco, where he was a gas station attendant. He moved his bride and their two children to Acaua after the advent of electricity to fulfill his dream to own a business. His father-in-law gave him land, and he and two friends constructed the medium-sized bar in less than 30 days. The structure contains a TV, pool table, refrigerator/freezer, and two shelves of beauty products and snack foods. Val said his place functions as a bar on weekends, and pointed to a shelf with liquor, soft drinks, and cigarettes. He praised the arrival of the electricity that allowed him to manifest his dream, but did not have an opinion on the Zero Hunger program.

17. Econoff stopped at several houses for a more comprehensive spectrum of opinions. Barthalemeu, 18, is one of five children and works on the family farm raising goats, pigs, horses, and chickens. The family sells goat cheese and left-over meat to the local market. Barthalemeu pointed out the cistern which was funded by UNICEF in 2002 during the Cardoso administration. Regina, 29, is the mother of three children, and the wife of a farmer. She raved about Zero Hunger and commented that her family also received the Bolsa Familia ("Family Stipend", an umbrella family-benefit program) stipend for a total of 95 Reals (exchange roughly 3 Reals to the USD) per month.

18. Antonio lives in a cluster of eight houses built with materials funded by the Cardoso administration. The municipality released the land, and eight families helped each other erect these humble dwellings in 30 days. Antonio commented that he did not vote for Lula during the 2002 election cycle, and will not vote for him in the future. He added that he voted against the current PT mayor, and resented the fact that Mayor Antonio Rodrigues Filho does not even live in Acaua, but in Paulastino, a municipality 18 kilometers away. Rita, 27, was downright bitter about the Zero Hunger program. She has one school-aged child, no husband, no income, and does not receive any money from Zero Hunger or the Family Fund.

19. Jose was repairing the cobblestone streets. He had done this seasonal work for 25 years in Acaua, which was incorporated eight years ago. This 36 year-old man appeared to be well into his 50s, evidence of his difficult life of working in the sun to support his family of four. He cannot work during the rainy season, but commented that as a recipient of the Zero Hunger card, he is less reliant on his extended family for basic needs.

110. The mayor's office in Acaua looks strikingly nice for a small Brazilian municipality. The city is run by City Administrator Jose Antonio Filho, 45, who left a teller job at the State Bank of Piaui after he was appointed by his father, the mayor. He said that the federal and state government governments, in concert with several NGOs, were working together to implement a myriad of social and community improvement programs. In addition to the ongoing installation of 394 cisterns, a community center with a swimming pool and 20 houses are being built.

111. Econoff asked about Rita's desperate situation as a single mother with no income and not qualifying for Zero Hunger and associated benefits. Filho said the community committee of seven people met once a month to evaluate who should receive benefits, which was difficult, because it is "the poor choosing the poor". Although there is no appeal process, he added that a family could re-apply monthly for the benefit.

112. Children guided Econoff to the home of Izilina, the municipality's Secretary of Health, by saying it was the nicest in Acaua. Indeed, it was a spacious, well-constructed home with coffered ceilings and crown moldings. This 33 year-old woman has been in her position since 1997, and her husband heads tourism (sic!) in the mayor's office. The community has a public health team consisting of 19 employees, including a dentist, doctor, and nurse. All of the health programs in place existed before Zero Hunger.

113. Edvaldo Pereira, attorney from the mayor's office in Petrolina, Pernambuco, commented that he could show Econoff people much worse off than the citizens of Acaua in a nearby quilombo (communities founded originally by run-away slaves). Afranho is a community located in Pernambuco, less than eight miles from Acaua. The mayor of the town is from the opposition party PSDB and commented that only 15 of Afranho's 400 inhabitants receive Zero Hunger cards. The municipality of 400 is much closer in appearance to Guaribus than to Acaua with its dirt roads and nothing but individual dwellings - not even a grocery store. Francisca de Lima, 57, is a 30-year resident who lives in a shanty with six family members. They are subsistence farmers and receive no benefits from any government program. Lima said she has not seen any improvement since the Lula government came to

power.

14. There is a sharp contrast between the Zero Hunger pilot towns. There is definitely poverty to be found in Acaua, but not so ubiquitous and repressive as in Guaribas. Piaui's Fome Zero Director Rosangela Sousa commented on Econoff's earlier trip (Ref. B) that Guaribas was selected as the pilot due to lack of infrastructure, and that Acaua was selected because it had the lowest per capita income. Guaribas was an obvious choice, but that of Acaua was more complex. The raw per capita income numbers were deceptive, because many people in the community are subsistence farmers, thus did not have a dire hunger problem.

15. Comment. It is striking that few residents gave Lula the credit for the positive changes Acaua has experienced via the Zero Hunger program. During this period of the administration's eroding popularity, not even this showcase municipality is generating positive publicity for the administration's social programs.

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